

INTRODUCTION

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These are two wise and helpful essays which focus on the profound challenge to the human enterprise on planet earth posed by burgeoning human population and the gargantuan use of resources by an affluent elite of this population. Both ask the questions of how male domination, as white European domination, has contributed to this problem of earth crisis and whether Christianity can be a part of the solution, rather than just a part of the problem.

Daniel Maguire, social ethicist teaching at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, compares two countries, Egypt and China, venues of two important world conferences, the United Nations Conference on Population and Development in 1994 and the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. Egypt represents a disaster area of pollution, burgeoning population, the split between the affluent lifestyle of an elite and the impoverishment of the majority. Once the grain basket of the Mediterranean world, Egypt today feeds most of its grain to livestock for a meat diet affordable only by the wealthy few.

China also represents a land of dense population. More than a fifth of the population of the world, 1.28 billion, lives there in a mountainous country with limited land suitable to feed this population. Its centralized communist government

has decided that it must take draconian measures to control this population in order to assure a minimum means of life for all. Its one-child policy has succeeded in 20 years in reducing its fertility rate by a third.

The world consensus that emerged from the conference on population and development is that coercive methods of population control are out and the focus should be women's empowerment and development, with the assumption that if women were fully equal they would voluntarily choose to have fewer children. Maguire applauded this affirmation of women's agency, but challenges the libertarian assumptions that global society can simply leave the population issue up to every individual woman and family. Individual rights need to be balanced by questions of the common good, and there is a proper role of government in setting limits on population and consumption, as they do in other areas, for the sake of the welfare of the community.

Maguire also challenges the notion that commitment to the common good of humanity as a whole on a common earth can be fired only by statistics and rational analysis. There needs to be a revival of the sense of the sacred, of awe and reverence for the presence of the divine in and through the whole earth house. There is a great thirst for such a renewed sense of the sacred among people today, but the Christian churches are not able to nourish it. Christians, most prominently among them, women, are departing from the churches, not out of secular disenchantment, but in search of a new experience of the enchantment of the natural world.

The old patterns of Christianity that fostered the separation of a male-dominating God from nature, an exclusivist Christology and a focus on heaven, not earth, as our true home, are dying, and deservedly so, for they have been major causes of a loss of a holistic sense of the sacred in and through life here on earth. There is a need to find a new common ground between religions based on the sense of the sacred that links us all together and which can inspire commitment to the common good of the earth.

Larry L. Rasmussen, social ethicist teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, parallels Maguire's essay from another perspective. Rasmussen begins by pointing to the geological significance of the cliffs of the New Jersey palisades visible from the Manhattan side of the Hudson River. These majestic cliffs represent a rift in what millennia ago was a unified global continent, Pangaea. When this unified land base of earth tore apart into separate continents, separating Europe from the Americas and from Asia, these distinct regions entered into separate evolutionary histories. Different ecologies and cultures evolved in these separate world regions.

Then some five hundred years ago this regional separation began to be knit together by the conquering energies of the people of one particular region, England and Western Europe. These people sent their swarming population across all the other regions of the world as explorers, conquerors, and settlers and in the process not only reshaped the demography, but the ecology of all the other regions of the earth.

A vast genocide of peoples and destruction of their distinct ecologies ensued, as the wars and diseases brought by Europeans killed peoples who had evolved in other regions without experience of these diseases and instruments of violence. The biota brought by the Europeans included not only their microbes, but other flora and fauna, their livestock and grains, reshaping the ecology of these regions into Neo-Europes, marginating or destroying the distinct ecologies that had grown up in these regions in their separate histories.

To the agricultural revolution which had begun in the five to ten millennia before Christ in several distinct regions, the Europeans added the industrial revolution, financed by the vast wealth accrued through colonial conquest of these other lands. Although human population growth had begun slowly with the agricultural revolution ten thousand years ago, the population explosion is a phenomenon of the last two hundred years, based on the vast expansion of productivity created by the industrial revolution, together with successes in sanitation and medicine that doubled life expectancy for these growing populations.

The Christian religion played a major role in justifying this expansive European imperialism, as European Christians identified themselves with the God who shaped and ruled the whole world at will. The information revolution in the twentieth century extends this global reach of Europeanized domination over the people and resources of the earth, while accentuating the docetic abstraction of intellectual elites from the material connections of body and earth that underlie these resources.

For Rasmussen this combination of population, consumption, and waste is on a collision course with a limited earth, but the peoples of the Neo-Europes who continue to profit from it, while more and more other people and the earth grow impoverished, are unwilling to accept the depth of the reversal of both thought and social patterns necessary. Two alternatives stand in stark contrast: the ideology of "sustainable development" of United Nations and World Bank rhetoric that believes one can continue to expand but in a "sustainable way" and the revolt against this global domination of the dominant economic powers represented by the indigenous peoples of Chiapas.

The indigenous people of Chiapas represent the rise of the suppressed peoples and lands of alternative regions of Pangaea overwhelmed for five hundred years and more by the neo-Europeans. They ask, not for more "development" from these governments and their economic agents, but the right to control their own region shaped by indigenous customs and communal ecological patterns.

Rasmussen offers policy suggestions for the solution of this conflict, and suggests that something like greater accountability to local communities and the reintegration of society into its ecological base must be part of that fourth revolution the depths of whose demands continue to be resisted by those determined to pursue the trajectory of global expansion of the few against the many.

Whither both religious ethics and global policies that seek an ecologically sustainable earth community? Maguire and Rasmussen, while offering some elements of a solution,

go on to call the reader to dig into their own imaginations and moral energies to make real commitments necessary to take the problem itself seriously. Metanoia, change of consciousness, is necessary to inspire the will to real alternatives. The religious communities have been part of the problem, but are being called on to become sources of the spiritual energy that must underlie any real commitment to a redemptive transformation.